

## Robbie Burns



We are reaching the end of January. As a piper, January can get very busy with Robbie Burns Dinners. I did five of them this year, being paid in cash and/or scotch (the good stuff), depending on the venue. As I began my Burns journey, I decided to do a little research on the Scottish Bard and how dinners in his honour take place all over the world over 200 years after his death.

Robert Burns came out of Ayrshire. His father believed in a good education, so young Robert and his older brother were taught to read and write. It set Burns off on his career, writing poetry, songs and letters, totally at least 542 individual pieces and it is not known if that is all of them. He wrote in a rich Scottish form and could turn a phrase better than anyone of his time. His topics centered on the trials of the common man, of which he was one. His poetry spoke of freedom, injustices perpetrated by the upper classes, his friends, and of course, love (many of his poems are titled Bonnie [insert young maiden's name here]). There is also much humour in his works which helped to make them so popular.

In 1781, Burns became a Mason. It was through the fraternity that his first book of poetry started to disseminate to places outside the Ayrshire countryside. But Burns was still poor and was about to take a job in Jamaica when he was encouraged to go to Edinburgh instead. There, he was welcomed into two masonic lodges, one of which was full of lords, earls and dukes. He published a second book of poetry and made a princely sum of 500 pounds. Burns was now famous and Jamaica faded from his mind.

So, through Masonry, Burns was able to be successful in Scotland. But how did his work go worldwide? Well, it was the late 1700's. I like to believe that after the last Scottish Uprising in 1745, the Scots were not only subjugated by the English, but were no longer allowed to fight against each other either, stopping all clan wars. So what were the Scots to do with all their new free time?

They went out and built the British Empire. You may have heard of the book “How the Scots Built the British Empire”. To a large extent, that’s true. There were few places in the Empire where the British Army did not send a Scottish regiment at one point or another during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many second and third sons of Scottish nobles went forth out into the world to make their own fortune as merchants. They all took their love of Burns with them. Part of the tradition of Burns poetry was a formal dinner on the day of his birth, January 25. The formal dinner part began in 1801.

Robert Burns had died on July 21, 1796 at the age of 37. Five years later at his cottage in Alloway, nine men, brother masons to Burns, gathered to remember him. They had a ceremonial dinner that followed some masonic traditions and regaled each other with tales of Burns and the reading of his poetry. A good time was had by all and they decided to get together on his birthday the following year instead to celebrate him again. So came 1802 and a group of Scottish merchants from Ayrshire put on a dinner as well on January 29. They discovered later that his birthday was the 25<sup>th</sup>. But this was the formation of the first Burns Club, which still celebrates Burns every January 25 to this day.

More and more yearly dinners began to spring up around Scotland, following the basic format established by that first dinner. With Scots now traversing the world, dinners began to take place in the far outposts of the empire. The first Burns dinner outside Scotland took place in Oxford in 1806, hosted by students from Glasgow. In London, the dinners arrived in 1810. By 1812, a dinner took place in India. Once Sir Walter Scott threw the first big formal dinner in Edinburgh in 1815, the die was cast.

But is Burns’ poetry really that good? Yes, it is. His prose flows effortlessly and his topics struck a chord with colonial inhabitants suppressed by their British overlords. Even in places where the British never colonized began to enjoy translations of Burns’ poetry and start to celebrate with dinners. There are big followings of Burns in Russia and China today. Some dinners are small affairs while others are huge. And most surprising, most of the attendees are not necessarily Scottish.

In closing, there must be a mention of the haggis. Traditionally, it was made from what was left over after a sheep was slaughtered and all the good meat went up to the laird’s house. With the organs all minced up, mixed with oatmeal and stuffed in the sheep’s stomach, it was cooked and eaten by the poor folk. Burns, coming from a farming family and likely to have eaten a few haggis in his day, wrote a poem called “Ode to the Haggis”, which is now recited at every dinner. It begins:

**Fair fa’ your honest, sonsie face,  
Great Chieftain o’ the Puddin-race!  
Aboon them a’ ye tak your place,  
Painch, tripe or thairm.**

The words themselves make even the most horrible Scottish accent flow.

The haggis of today has much more palatable ingredients and holds a special place in the Burns tradition, a legacy that continues to make its mark today as it has for over two centuries.